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C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 003311

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TAGS: PARM PREL MARR PGOV KS
SUBJECT: DEFENSE MINISTER YOON ON OPCON, JIKDO RANGE, AND
BASE RETURNS

REF: SEOUL 03286

Classified By: Amb. Alexander Vershbow. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: On September 25, following his meeting with visiting Deputy Under Secretary for Acquisition Alfred Volkman, Minister of National Defense Yoon Kwang-ung raised several Alliance issues with the Ambassador one-on-one. On OPCON, Yoon emphasized the need for the USG to show flexibility on the timing of the transfer. Yoon welcomed the developments over the Jikdo training range and counseled patience regarding outstanding base return issues. The ROK Defense Minister, noting that his own term would be ending soon, said that he and President Roh were determined to resolve remaining Alliance issues before Roh administration leaves office at the end of next year. END SUMMARY

OPCON

12. (C) Minister Yoon repeatedly appealed for Washington to approach the discussion of the transfer of wartime operational control (OPCON) with more flexibility, taking into consideration the views of the South Korean military and population in general. Yoon described DOD's stance as "persistent" in seeking transfer in 2009 and stated that he hoped the U.S. would listen attentively at the upcoming Security Policy Initiative meeting (SPI 10) to what the ROK delegation had to say. Highlighting the near 60-year U.S.-ROK Alliance, Yoon said that a difference of a few years should not become a "source of unnecessary disagreement." While the U.S. with its global concerns did not see the transfer of OPCON as an important issue, this was of enormous importance to the Korean people. He was surprised at the outpouring of public concerns, and pleaded that both countries proceed with a pace that would allow consensus to form.

Jikdo Range

13. (C) Minister Yoon said that he had just confirmed with the Mayor of Kunsan that construction at Jikdo island for the installation of the scoring system was to begin immediately. Prime Minister Han had played a key role behind the scenes in energetically engaging the local authorities. Reflecting on some senior USFK officials' recent press comments on Jikdo, Yoon urged U.S. officials in Korea to be more cautious when discussing the issues publicly. Although straight-forwardness was always appreciated in private conversations, public comments by military commanders should

be handled with more sensitivity, Yoon said.

Base Return

¶4. (C) Yoon sympathized with USFK officials in their frustrations in concluding environment remediation for the bases being returned to the ROK. This was a sensitive item between the MND and the National Assembly. The ruling Uri Party in the National Assembly was thinking ahead to the next election and ignoring the current priorities of the government. Yoon requested that the U.S. approach the issue with more patience.

Valedictory Mode

¶5. (C) Yoon described President Roh as "very brave" in tackling Alliance issues throughout his term in office, even if it caused a "noisy reaction" in the ROK society. He and President Roh had done their best to maintain the U.S.-ROK Alliance as a strong and effective institution. As his own term approaches the end, Yoon said he and President Roh were determined to "finish the job," referring to the outstanding Alliance transformation issues such as base returns, OPCON transfer and Yongsan relocation. Some base return matters had caused popular criticisms, but Roh was committed to leave office next year without major outstanding issues for the next administration. The Ambassador conveyed his appreciation to Yoon for his efforts in strengthening the Alliance and commented that during their years working together, Presidents Bush and Roh had made more changes to the Alliance than at any other time in history.

¶6. (C) Comment: Minister Yoon is widely rumored to be leaving the MND for the NIS later this year. NIS is usually the home to the most trusted presidential advisor, indicating an enormous level of good will on the part of President Roh for his defense minister. Roh does indeed believe that he has tackled -- and resolved -- the toughest of Alliance issues, which he could not have done without Yoon.

VERSHBOW